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The Best Defence - Short Story

It all started when Base II (there had been no contact with Base I for some years by then), so when Base II decided that we should go and see what Europans would do if we tried to take some of their stone. I guess the Allies knew the answer all along, and did not declare war straight away because they didn't have enough resources for it, and hoped that the Europans would give us some ore without much fuss if we asked them just a bit threateningly. But as no known civilization had ever met a Europan in person, publicly, they said nothing.

With about fifty other soldiers we landed at what seemed to be the crater of a recent meteorite. Officers back at the Base calculated that the moon could only support about forty of any complex life form, and they hoped that the crust would be thin enough for us to get through where we arrived.

'I was waiting for my transport to the mines,' said cjololic-i-, 'when a crack opened in the ground about a step away from me.' He added that he'd heard some rumbling before that, but currents were notoriously hard to predict in that area, so he'd been used to hearing strange noises.

There were some who believed him, but those things were now roaming up and down in the outskirts of coijoil-oil, so silently, without words, a common understanding formed accusing him of somehow letting those hideous things in, or, in one word, of treason.

There were about fifty of those things around, all in thick dark green skins, with four wobbly appendices with which they tried to get around in the uuoil-c-i-, and large googly things on their top that emitted a constant stream of bubbles. They didn't seem to be very interested in anything but the ground; they were digging and picking, taking up smaller rocks and putting them into a large metal machine. The Council was not at all pleased with the visitors, but for the time being, they decided to leave them alone and watch.

We hadn't had any idea about what to expect, so we were wearing dark green camouflage diving suits and scuba sets. Each of us also had some grenades and an underwater rifle firing short metal darts that could get pretty far in the water, but these wouldn't have been of much use in an actual battle. In fact, nobody expected any resistance, and there was no sign at that moment that we'd find ourselves in a fight. We did see a couple of primitive constructions

not too far from us, but could not detect the presence of life, so we went on collecting and analysing samples, and preparing the report back to the Base.

With Sandra and Garry we were sent to drill core samples near the abandoned buildings.

'Where do you think they are?' bubbled Sandra's voice over the radio in my ear as we put the drill on the ground (we started to call it that, but, actually, it was the ceiling of this claustrophobic place). She'd studied alien physiognomy, so she was naturally excited.

'We detected nothing living. They're probably gone, if you ask me,' I replied, and then looked at Garry. He was the youngest of us, about twenty-five, and perhaps a bit hasty; but now he stood motionless and erect, turned towards the buildings. When he finally spoke, his voice came out throaty of excitement.

'There's something there.'

He was right. Just at the corner of one of the cube-like constructions, there stood a dark figure. Its outline was blurred by the fine sand churned up by the currents and hardly visible in the greyish bluish glow of the distance. Still, it was unmistakably humanoid, and with its dark dress and with the gleam on its head, it looked unnervingly like one of us. The problem was that we were the farthest away from the ship.

'I'm going and see what that is,' said Garry's voice as I saw Sandra jumping at him and grabbing his feet.

'You're not going anywhere,' she shouted. 'You stay here. You don't know a thing about non-carbon-based life forms. They can be...'

'They can be what?'

'They...' We all looked up.

The thing was gone. Garry turned to Sandra. She started to explain herself.

'I've read about life-forms without organized material. You cannot detect them, but...'

'If you cannot detect them, what on earth was that?' he retorted between his teeth.

'I've got no idea.'

'I think they saw me, cjii-,' said cjjouj to his superior. 'I returned immediately from the patrol to report.' Everyone had been alerted in the city by now, and some of them were sent out to monitor the activities of the green things.

'That's bad. That's too bad,' replied the sergeant, and, leaving cjjouj in the office, rushed into the meeting room.

The Council had been holding a meeting for the past ten Jovian hours, and as the reports started coming in, the intention of the visitors became clear. They analysed the outer crust, probably attracted by its high iron content. The High Priests had warned them that they must protect the outer crust, as if it was damaged, the uuoil-c-i- would simply evaporate. The Europans had long

given up the convenient way of getting their building material from there, and turned to the Second Crust to get some stone from the depths.

The meeting adjourned just before Noon Darkness, and the Councillors came rushing out of the room decorated by rough nonfigurative carvings. Messengers were dispatched to find all Europans on the dark grey streets of coijoil-oil, and gather them together in the square before the perfect stone cube that served as the Council's headquarters. They were going to defend the outer crust at all costs.

It was, I think, immediately after the Sun appeared again, putting the ground aglow once more for a short period of time, that we began to feel something. The currents became stronger and stronger, and soon we could hardly see in the dense, pitch-black underwater sandstorm that ensued. The ones working more than a mile away from the ship were summoned back, and there were constant radio checks to make sure nobody was taken away by the water. The machines were struggling with the flowing sand, and when the fine dust started to clog up the gears, all the drills were ordered to be shut off. We left the equipment to the mercy of the storm, and headed for cover to the ship.

The lieutenant's voice shrilled in our ears, and the fifty of us quickly formed ranks and grabbed each other's arms in an attempt to remain on the ground on this moon of inverted gravity.

And then, it all stopped.

'There's about fifty of them. We'll need everyone.'

'Do you believe we can trust him, cjii-?'

'We have no other choice.'

And so cjololic-i- was dragged from the cell he'd been put into for the time of the investigation. In the next moment, he found himself going out of the city, to the place where he'd first heard that rumbling noise.

After the sudden end of the storm, the water stood unnaturally calm. The sand started to settle like a thick brown layer of fog. The last rays of the sun reignited the glow from below the ground, and in the eerie light we spotted the black outline of the nicely formed ranks of the enemy.

They seemed to wear dark suits, and a cloud of bubbles had already formed above their heads. They must've been taken by surprise by the storm as well, as they were standing arm in arm, facing inwards.

The two groups broke up to turn toward each other just about the same time.

'Non-carbon-based life form, eh?' asked Garry sarcastically.

'Holy shit,' whispered Sandra. 'Holy shit.'

It seemed hours while we just stood there, facing the wobbly outlines of the Europans. Both sides obviously waited to see what the other would do.

‘Something’s not right,’ murmured Sandra, not aware that we could hear her.

‘What’s not right?’

‘I mean… I don’t think they live here. Look at those bubbles. They need air.’

‘Quiet there!’ That was the lieutenant’s voice. ‘Guys, there’s no way out of this. Our equipment is behind them. We’ll fire a warning shot. That may scare them away.’

The sound of the shot echoed twice before fading away. The two-inch long dart pierced the water, and went upwards into the depths of Europa. We stood and waited. The Europans stood and waited.

A moment later, another dart appeared coming from the enemy, going upwards and disappearing in the cloudy water.

‘Did anyone hear the other shot?’

Nobody did. The water would’ve transmitted the sound better than the air, but their shot seemed to have been silent. They must’ve had some advanced stuff to fire it.

The seconds dragged on slowly while the lieutenant tried to assess the situation. Scaring the Europans away apparently didn’t work. But they didn’t seem to be keen on starting the battle, either. They might’ve known too little about us.

‘Let’s just go there and get them!’ shouted Garry. About fifteen minutes had passed, and all of us got a bit impatient. They were about the same number as we were. They didn’t seem particularly dangerous. Finally, the order came. We were to advance, firing constantly in their direction. If we got close enough, we could use the grenades.

A grey swarm of darts emerged in front of us as those in the first row fired in the water with clockwork regularity. The Europans also started to move, but it was hard to tell in what direction through the cloud of mud and metal. The rifles were deafening as we advanced slowly towards the enemy. It took about five seconds for the darts to reach them, and another five for us to realize that they’d started the counter-attack.

A myriad of shots began to swish between our legs and above our heads. Sandra ducked to avoid one, but in the same split second she was hit in the leg.

‘It’s nothing! It’s nothing!’ she shrieked as the blood gushed out forming a brown cloud in the water. She bent down and pulled something out of the flesh. She held it close to her mask.

‘It’s a metal dart! Can anyone hear me? They’re firing the same darts that we do. Over.’ No one reacted. ‘Can anyone you hear me?’

A second later we got the ceasefire order. Ten seconds later the last dart whizzed past us, and everything was calm again. We stood about a hundred yards from the Europans. Garry helped Sandra tie a piece of her sleeve over the wound to stop the bleeding. A couple of other people were hurt as well:

some had their ears chipped; some were applying rubberized bandage to their arms.

'You should get behind me,' said Garry to Sandra.

'I'm not going anywhere,' she replied, but her voice was distant.

'They've stopped moving,' I said.

There was a tense silence. The constant rumble of the currents was inaudible over the thuds of my heart in my ears. They were just standing there. Through the dust they seemed like dozens of shadows floating neither too close, nor too far.

It was Sandra's voice that broke the silence. 'I don't think they have.'

'What?' I turned to her. Her face was pale, and she stood unsteadily on the ground. Garry put his arm around her waist to support her.

'Sandra... Don't do this to me.'

There were hardly any bubbles coming out of her set. I started to take a step to see how bad she was, when suddenly her words erupted.

'They're coming.'

It was one of those voices which are empty and full of life; which are no longer human, but mean more than anything.

'They're coming.'

I turned, and as I looked hard, I could see the Europans approaching without even moving a limb. They were clearly humanoid, dressed in green suits and wearing scuba sets. Sometimes I thought I even saw the rifles in their hands with which they'd just pelted us. They got nearer every second like a movie zooming in on a screen.

'Grenades ready!' roared the lieutenant. 'I want two on the sides, one in the middle, as far as you can.'

There was nothing that could offer cover, so on the first 'Frag out!' we lay prone as close to the ground as possible. We counted the seconds until the explosions. At about three, someone spotted a black projectile coming in our direction. It was a grenade.

'Grenade!' And then another:

'Grenade on the left end!'

'There's three! I repeat, three! Take cover! Take cover!'

We scrambled up to get away from the grenades, and did our best to protect ourselves from the impending shock waves. I felt the water squeezing my back, and there was someone screaming and then falling silent.

'Take Jones to the ship,' we heard the lieutenant over the radio. 'Good work boys, we're making progress.' I stood up and looked, and indeed, the Europans were just scrambling to their feet, too.

'Two more grenades—quick, before they're ready!' ordered the lieutenant.

Garry was the first to move, then another shout came from the other end. 'Frag out!'

Sandra was still lying on the ground, trying to catch her breath.

'Idiots!' she shrilled on the top of her voice. 'Can't you see they aren't doing anything? They just reflect what we do! We're fighting fucking ourselves!'

Without a sound, two grenades appeared coming in our direction. One of them landed next to her, and before I could even start to move, it exploded. I felt the pressure in my ears, and white light flashed before my eyes. By the time I came round, anarchy had broken loose. Garry was kneeling next to what used to be my colleague. Her death must've been instantaneous.

'Is it true?' Garry asked.

'What?'

'What Sandra said.'

I was irritated, but I was mainly angry with myself. That I'd been so stupid that I'd missed the obvious all along.

'Do you really suppose we come here where no one has been before to find a handful of people just like ourselves? Dressed the same? Having the same equipment?'

I guess the answer was as unexpected as obvious. I wondered when Sandra got it and why she hadn't told us before.

'I threw that grenade, then,' said Garry, standing up. 'That killed her.'

'This is not going to work,' said cjjouj. 'They're hardly hurt, cjii-.'

'I think one or two of them are dead.'

'It's getting too long. We're getting tired. And we wouldn't have to do this if it weren't for –'

'That's how you feel?'

'Well, it's hardly my fault, is it?'

'Is that how the others feel?'

'It's all right,' interrupted cjololic-i-. 'I know it's me. I'm going there and this whole thing will be over.'

'Don't get too near. You can't reflect something on itself.'

But cjololic-i- wasn't listening. 'I'm going,' he said. 'If anybody wants to come, they will.'

'They're coming!' shouted someone in my earphones.

Garry was already beside himself. 'Fuck you! You told me there was nothing there but us. How the heck is it possible that they are coming then?'

'It's simple.'

'Yeah?'

'Yeah. The mirror is moving.'

'The mirror?'

'Whatever is reflecting us is coming nearer. And it's coming fast.'

Garry turned and stared into the water. The shadows were about two dozen steps away. Motionless and without a sound, they glided nearer and nearer.

Garry glanced back at Sandra. I saw his eyes going blank, and then he whirled around and pushed off. He swam fast, apparently determined to meet our enemy, whatever it was.

'Who is that?' snapped the lieutenant. He'd been trying to keep order after the devastating effect of the returned grenades, and was losing control. 'You! Come back! This is an order!'

The people turned to see what was happening. Ten yards remained between Garry's figure and the reflections, which meant he was just about to reach the mirror. For a moment I could make out his reflection as well, moving as swiftly as he did, but in the opposite direction. It was strange that nobody tried to stop him. As for me, I thought of him now as the stupidest person in the universe, but I also envied his courage, and was, I had to admit, proud of him in a way. And at that moment, he met his reflection.

I turned away and raised my arm to protect my head. I expected an explosion caused by the union of fifty kilograms of antimatter with fifty kilograms of regular matter. I tried to figure out how much of the galaxy would actually survive. But nothing like that happened. The water rippled where I thought the mirror had been, and its suddenly visible shiny surface slowly dissolved. Garry was swimming as ferociously as before, but now in our direction. It wasn't until about long ten seconds later that he realized that something had happened. He stopped, and turned back toward the Europans. But they were gone.

He started off again, and swam to where they'd been. He got to our drills, and then came back.

'Garry, can you hear me?' I whispered in the microphone.

'Is that Garry?' asked the lieutenant.

'Yes, sir.'

'What the hell you think you're doing, Sawnders?' I heard the lieutenant. 'Sawnders, are you there?'

But Garry swam on. He didn't even stop for Sandra. He was about to swim past me, and I reached to grab him, when he turned. His face was distorted with pain. His feet stopped moving, and he started to sink like an autumn leaf with a brown cloud forming around the middle of his chest. As I looked up, I saw the lieutenant lowering his gun.

A couple of us were sent to explore the area, and, after half an hour, it was decided that it was safe enough to collect our equipment. There wasn't much talk as we grabbed the drills and carried them back to the ship. We were boarding when I found myself facing the lieutenant. He nodded.

'You could've killed me there,' I said.

'I was willing to take that risk, Codd.'

Later I learned that he'd tampered with the report to the Base so that mining on Europa would seem too expensive and difficult. The moon was left

undisturbed for the decades to come, and, as far as I know, nobody ever heard of its inhabitants again.